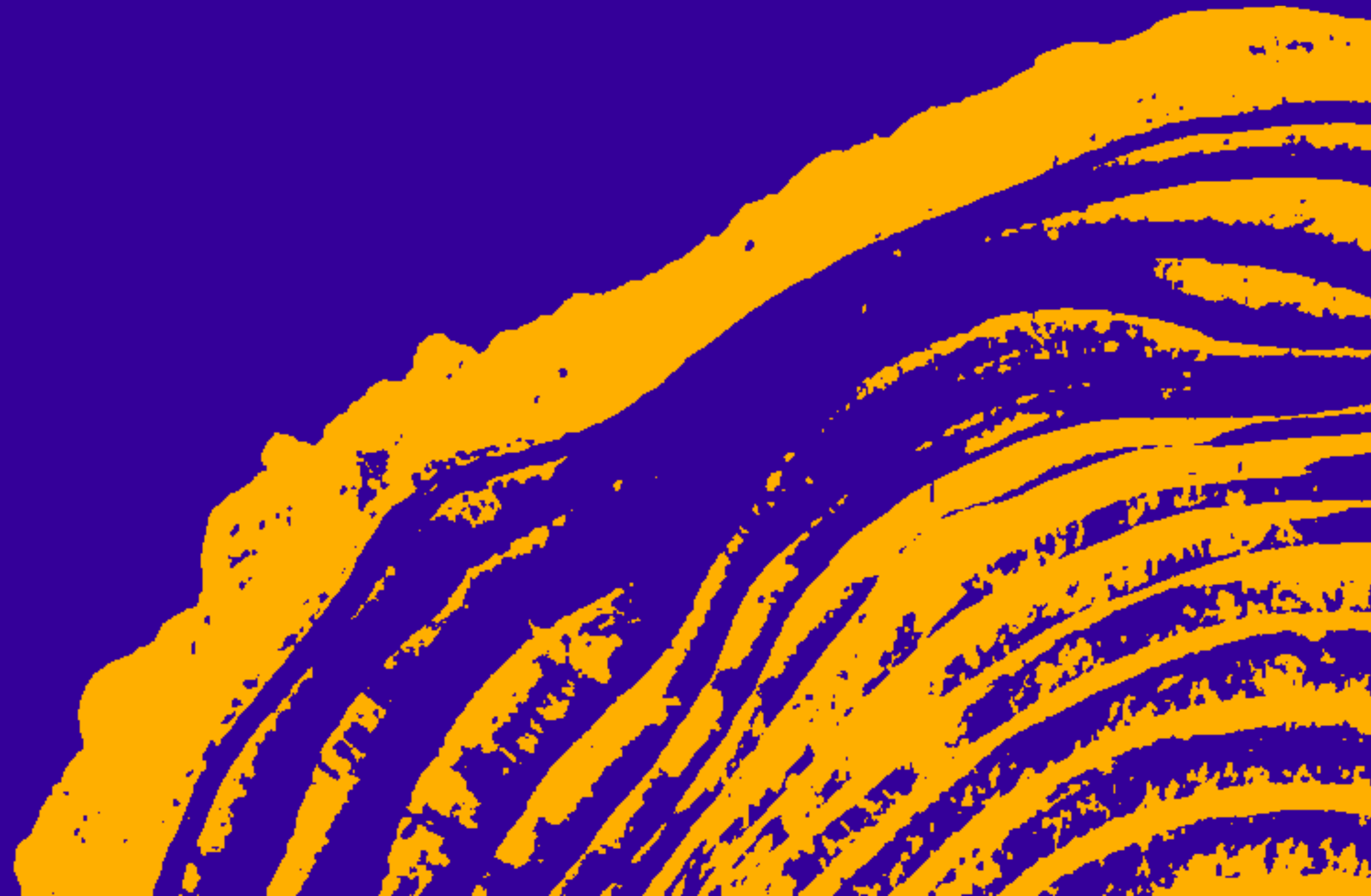


Toward a New Wesleyan Ecosystem

Insights Report



Project

Over five months, we gathered eighteen people from across the Wesleyan landscape, from congregational clergy to lay chaplains, from foundation staff to bishops, from the institutional center to the shimmering edge.

Together, we focused on a single design challenge.

How might we reimagine the Wesleyan movement
to meet the soul needs of today?



Insights

Our first line of inquiry was about the soul needs of the religiously underserved. Next, we explored how the gifts of the Wesleyan movement might meet these needs. Finally, we wondered how to support leaders who might be able to connect these gifts with these needs.

We synthesized patterns from all of our conversations with participants and experts to identify recurring themes. This is what we learned.

What are the soul needs of the religiously underserved
along their journey of spiritual deepening?



Needs

real friendship

Confidantes, rather than social media likes. Relationships that are trustworthy, not transactional. To be seen, known, and loved—by real people over time—and to be a real friend to others. To know who to turn to when it matters most. Friendship that deepens and grows.

deep healing

To get to the root of trauma. Honesty about our history—especially institutional complicity in perpetuating harm. To address the past, tell the truth about what happened, and change it. To hold and move through pain, both personally and collectively. Support for mental and spiritual health. Something different for our future.

trustworthy theology

A religious vision of the world that can engage science and withstand crisis. Satisfying engagement with deep theological questions and concepts of God that resonate with the realities of life. Pathways to explore and interrogate theology that have real and practical implications for how one chooses to live.

shameless authenticity

Permission to be vulnerable and practice at doing it. Intimate, trustworthy spaces that invite, encourage, and accept each person's authentic participation. The chance to show up as yourself in community and be received. To belong. Freedom from shame.

formation with choice

Clear pathways for spiritual development, yet with agency over the pace and direction one takes. Structure and commitment along with personal individuation. Space to deepen practices and commitments, ask tough questions, and integrate justice work and service with contemplation and worship. Community for formation, and avenues toward leadership in offering gifts and wisdom. Not to be alone.

repurposed religion

To counteract the experiences that have led to associating the church with pain and that make it hard to draw on religious resources. To receive the best of religious rituals, practices, community structures, and wisdom teachings in such a way that they can be reclaimed. To be reconnected to lineage. To have a hand in creating the new shape of religious life.

Outside Experts

*Varun Soni
Dean of Religious Life, USC*



“Belongingness is the crisis in our country.”

*Killian Noe
Founder, Recovery Cafe*



“People need authentic community, a place where they are deeply known and loved; where they experience forgiveness.”

*Rei Wang
Co-Founder, The Grand*



“People need help with big life decisions and moments.”

What are the unique gifts of Wesleyanism beyond congregations
that are best poised to serve these needs?



Gifts

grace above all

Wesley's three forms of grace—preventive, justifying and sanctifying—are as compelling today as they ever were, even if the exact language to describe them will change. As rates of anxiety, depression and suicide climb ever higher, people are hungry to experience unconditional love, to heal, and to grow.

covenant groups

Whether focused on testimony, meaning-making or loving accountability, Wesleyan covenant groups are perfectly poised to organize people into lasting, loving relationships and instill the discipline of spiritual practices at differing levels of depth. Small groups are an anchor for belonging and vulnerability in a world of constant digital performance.

justice- making

There is no holiness without social holiness. Wesley's clarity and integrity resonate deeply with our contemporary context as we face a slew of systemic evils. The Wesleyan movement can insist on high standards of ethical action when paired with practical guidance. Dismantling white supremacy must be a core discipline of every Wesleyan community.

theological middle way

Wesley's practical tools, catholic spirit, and conjunctive theology offer pathways into holy living. The quadrilateral remains a masterpiece of theological integration with lasting potential to shape future leaders. In an age of spectrum identities, a theological middle way can hold together a diverse array of beliefs and practices, with an express invitation to draw on scientific discovery, embodied experience, ancient wisdom and sacred text.

leaders everywhere

Anyone can be called to leadership. Wesleyanism's commitment to lay leadership and radical distribution of authority will be a cornerstone for the future of the movement. Whether in the workplace, through online gaming, or in justice movements, leaders will benefit from formation that is widely available, modular, and constantly encountering the edge to shape its relevance.

lineage of peoplehood

Wesleyanism encompasses intergenerational collectivity: the experience of being part of a greater body and a shared story. Reimagined for today, this gift could powerfully address the sense of social and spiritual atomization among the religiously underserved. The Wesleyan Movement can help to counteract individualistic approaches to self, community, and God, and to center collective wellbeing and shared sustenance, as through group worship.

Outside Experts

*Simran Jeet Singh
Author and teacher*



“If it doesn’t feel authentic, it’s not going to work. People have BS detectors. Also, it won’t be sustainable!”

*Sarah Waxman
Founder, At The Well*



“I came across new ways of engaging Judaism because I was exposed to other traditions - doing ten years of yoga.”

*Lama Rod Owens
Author and teacher*



“The Buddhist teachings move through the intersectionalities of my blackness and my queerness, and that challenges the lineage.”

How might we equip leaders of the future to
be free from today's constraints?



Equipping Leaders

release
outcomes

Move away from trying to create Methodists. Be unattached to what people make of the journey we support them on. Just help people surround themselves with folks who believe in them, who see their whole lives, and who are for them.

be like
Jesus

Give people a better sense of why God made them. Show up for them in a way that teaches them what it means to live a life that is like Jesus. Simply help them to do the same. Everything else is non-essential and therefore negotiable.

call not
credential

As in the Movement for Black Lives, leadership of the future will not and cannot be chosen or authorized from within existing institutions. Pursue leadership by affinity not assignment, equipped by call rather than credential or formal education. Create new pathways for communities to identify and anoint leaders.

open
source

Develop accessible, inspiring opportunities for spiritual becoming, with low thresholds, linguistic flexibility, and high relationship, support, and encouragement. Our goal is to help people become awake to a journey, not to dictate a single pathway.

nimble
networks

Forget about building something that will last across lifetimes. Inspire, create and support self-organizing groups with shared affinity, practice, lineage, wisdom teachers, texts, and rituals, all holding and inspiring networks of practitioners and leaders.

live the
tradition

What's coming is not a threat to our existence. Embrace evolution as the movement of the Holy Spirit. God loves us where we are AND where we are moving!

Outside Experts

*Leora Kaye
Director of Program,
Union for Reform Judaism*



“Our principle is ‘Choice through knowledge.’ People can make choices but those choices need to be rooted in actual knowledge.”

*John Dorhauer
General Minister and President,
United Church of Christ*



“The competing interests are the movement of the Holy Spirit vs. the behavior habits of the institution.”

*Elías Ortega
President, Meadville-Lombard
Theological School*



“A warning: Our theological commitments got left behind and now our movement is theologically illiterate.”

SANCTIFY FRIENDSHIP

Uplift, inspire, and teach healthy social connection for its own sake. Make belonging an end not a means.

#FRIENDSHIPISTHENEWCHAPLAINCY

The crisis of belonging runs so deep that basic human capacities like friendship are in short supply. So many of our personas were bereft of confidantes with whom they could really be themselves, trust, and explore. Many associated the church with exclusion and alienation, or at least conditional acceptance, rather than friendship.

You don't need credentials to be a friend. People across the Wesleyan movement could be empowered to recognize friendship as foundational to their mission. It will be crucial to avoid any sense of transaction or "end game" in cultivating friendship (ie, I'm befriending you so you'll join the church). The relationships must be ends in themselves.

EXPAND FORMATION

Go all-in on spiritual formation beyond theological education and Sunday School.

#BECOMINGFORALL

The longing for spiritual growth and deepening was resonant across personas, and yet we heard story after story about people's inability to identify and access opportunities for spiritual companionship. Spiritual leadership development is easily the number-one need of "secular" community and edge leaders as they create efforts to address this gap.

Expand formation from congregations and seminaries, extending the gifts of God to the people of God where they live their lives: online, individually and in small groups, and in families, with processes and pathways tailored to people at different stages of spiritual deepening.



REWARD THE EDGE

**Embolden edge leaders
with radical permission.**

#OUTLIERSLEAD

Broadcast their testimonies. Celebrate their authority. Learn from their mishaps and mistakes. Witness their rituals. Sing their songs. Listen to their language. Shower resources upon them. Report your progress to *them*.

Their vision and encounter with the world is where the future of Wesleyanism is being born.